

# Four Ways Flight Schools Can Attract Students Without a Big Budget

By Kathryn Creedy



With all the reasons there are to learn to fly, it is not easy for a flight school to know exactly what it is that will move someone from observer to pilot. But there are many low-cost opportunities a flight school can use to fill those classrooms and get those planes in the air!

Flight training can seem a daunting prospect to a prospective student. Most of what they hear is that learning to fly is costly, time consuming, and “a rich man’s sport.”

However, they will also hear how rewarding it can be if they join a community of like-minded enthusiasts who take flying over golfing any day, and hear how flying gives them an unprecedented freedom no other activity can deliver. Actually, rewarding doesn’t begin to describe the feeling when, during a day of “touch and go” practice, your instructor opens the door of the plane, gets out, and says, “You don’t need me anymore, it’s time for your solo!”

So how can flight schools attract more students and help them experience this special moment?

## 1) Share, Interact, & Listen Online

Today any business has to rely on a lot more than word of mouth. They have to establish and increase their visibility online. Social media is a very cost-effective way to reach your target market. It can be done by someone on your staff, or if you have a very small or busy office, it is not that expensive to outsource. The secret sauce in social media is not creating content, although you want to do that, too, but curating content. That means posting articles of interest to people who are considering flight lessons. There are great sources of material on the internet that you can link to and comment on.

The important thing is to be consistent – with small but consistent efforts to collect great stories and tell them on your website and social media will associate your brand with positive results, and build a large and loyal audience over time!

To attract potential students, share stories about the wonders of becoming a pilot, and put it into context with the costs of other career preparation or recreational activities. Also, share stories about why people should learn to fly – there are benefits far beyond the cockpit. A recent story by Kassy Coan provides great fodder for aviation schools about how piloting skills spill over into every day work and play.

## **SAMPLE TOPICS FOR YOUR FLIGHT SCHOOL'S BLOG OR SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS:**

- Congratulate successful students – Introduce new students celebrate first solos, exams passed, ratings earned with a photo & short write-up.
- Highlight your staff – Introduce your instructors & staff with a photo & short bio.
- Document Events! Take photos of your hangar barbecues, open houses, and other events.
- Tell the stories of your airport – One flight school regularly published photos of the deer that visited the airport. This became an incredibly popular feature.
- Share success stories – Write longer articles about how aviation changed the life of a student or staff member.
- “Borrow” news stories– Link to and comment on a story from the aviation magazines you read – AOPA’s Learn To Fly blog has great material for recreational AND career minded students. Airline Pilot Central publishes news of interest to future Captains and First Officers

You want to post these articles (or videos) first on your own website, to attract people who are searching on Google, Yahoo or Bing, and then, to get the most “mileage” out of your investment of time, you should also publish short excerpts on LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook. Once you develop a following on your website and social media, you can publish special deals that can prompt somebody to get off the couch and into the aviation classroom.

## **2) Create And Share Compelling “Act Now” Offers**

Create a powerful limited-time only offer that your ideal customers can’t resist. You can publish your offer on your website, social media, via postcards and many other advertising venues. One particularly effective way to present your offer is to distribute your offer to large audiences via Living Social or Groupon.

Offering a deal for an open house or event that introduces your program might be just the thing to move someone from “I’m thinking about it.” to “Let’s get started today!”

## **SAMPLE OFFERS:**

- Discover Flight Lesson – You’ve heard about this, but are you distributing this offer in a way that people can actually respond to it? Is it compelling, attractive, and limited-time?
- Flight Lesson for Two – Includes an hour of ground instruction and a short flight
- Flight Training Intro Package – Multi-day ground instruction with a flight near the end
- Sightseeing Flight for Two with Mimosas – If you could throw in 6-month subscription to your favorite aviation mag, it might help encourage them to come back.

Keep in mind, the goal is to make contact with serious students rather than the weekend bargain hunters and impulse-driven thrill-seekers. We’ve seen many flight schools offer a free or drastically reduced “discovery flight,” which tends to attract bargain entertainment shoppers rather than students interested in pursuing a pilot rating. So make sure the cost of your promotion comes with a benefit that covers such things as fuel, instructor pilots, and wear and tear on the aircraft, which are not cheap. We’d recommend offering an educational event or a ground school promotion that keeps the emphasis on serious students that are the most likely to pursue (and finish!) your program.

## **3) Share Your Passion For Aviation Locally**

There isn’t an aviation geek alive who doesn’t like to talk aviation and this is your opportunity. If you can be strategic and organized and about targeting local groups, in your community, you can raise awareness about your programs, and the advantages of learning to fly. This is a little used technique for enhancing the visibility of your organization and making your services an accessible option for those seeking a different recreational activity.

Every month Rotary International, Chambers of Commerce, technology groups, libraries, schools, organizations for retired executives, business women and minorities in your area have meetings and events and are always looking for interesting and unusual speakers and presentations. Becoming a pilot is something many business professionals and entrepreneurs would love to learn more about. Aviation provides an unusual and sexy program.

There is also a significant push by aviation associations such as Women in Aviation, which hosts annual Girls in Aviation events throughout the country. There is also the University Aviation Association to attract youngsters to aviation. They have worked with local youth groups and have developed merit badges for completing activities related to aviation. Aviation schools should reach out to these organizations to connect what they do with what you do. After all, you are attracting their parents as well as the students. Imagine the headline when a father/daughter or mother/son team finish your course.

There is a critical need to attract new people to aviation and this presents aviation schools with an opportunity to help raise awareness of aviation as a recreational or career option. Local schools are also pushing STEM (an acronym for Science, Technology Engineering and Math) activities and pushing aviation as a great STEM activity will both enhance the awareness of aviation but aviation in their community.

But don't just talk about your business. Focus on the adventure and benefits of becoming a pilot and raise awareness of the importance of aviation to the community and the nation. This puts such speeches on a higher plane 😊 than a self-serving pitch about your business. Talk about all the flying resources in your area, including flying clubs, businesses, maintenance, tourism, industry, and the economic impact they bring to your community.

For any keynote presentation, you want to generate business without being overly "pitchy" or "salesy." You can do this by including printed handouts for each participant that have one of your Special Offers (tailored to the group) printed on it. Refer to it in your speech, but don't make it sound like a pitch. "If you'd like more information, there is a special offer in your handouts for the first ten Lion's Club members that would like to take us up on this. I'd be happy to answer any questions about that after the event."

Here again, businesses often say they don't have the time to do this, but creating a presentation and researching local organizations can be inexpensively outsourced. (See the Sidebar for more presentation ideas!)

## 4) Explore Partnership Opportunities

If your program is a good fit for career-minded students, you may be able to acquire all the students you need without ANY advertising, by forming partnerships with airlines or universities.

Contact the HR Department of the nearest regional airline. It may take some work to find the correct person to talk with about their staffing needs, but here are some questions you could ask to get the ball rolling: Do you have trouble keeping a full roster of pilots? What are your biggest staffing problems? What training could we offer/emphasize to help you?

If you're open to training foreign students, a partnership with a university in your target country can provide a great pipeline of business, particularly if your school can offer services that would be attractive to foreign students like condensed, intensive training schedules and room and board packages for students while they're in training. (You can partner with a local hotel to provide this.)

If you don't have time to handle all the arrangements but can offer great services for career-minded students, you could contact a Matchmaker Service like Airline Pilot Gateway

[www.AirlinePilotGateway.com](http://www.AirlinePilotGateway.com) They find good partnerships between airlines, students and flight schools.

So, next time your student roster seems a bit thin, and your advertising budget is even thinner, try one (or all) of these strategies to keep revenues flowing in and satisfied, qualified pilots flowing out of your program!